

FROM FIELD AND STUDY

Praying Mantis preying on Vertebrates – An observation of a praying mantis killing and partially eating a Brown Honeyeater (*Lichmera indistincta*) at the tourist resort of El Questro Station, off the Gibb River Road in the East Kimberley region of Western Australia is reported. Three other records of praying mantises eating vertebrates in Western Australia are also included.

While acting as a tour guide with Coate's Wildlife Tours, and camped at El Questro Station, a Brown Honeyeater was observed being caught, killed and partially eaten by a praying mantis, which was green in colour and 80 to 100mm in length. Photos were taken and sent to the Western Australian Museum, however identification of the species has not been possible. These types of incidents have been rarely recorded in the past. The following observations were made on the 17 July 2003 from approximately 12.30pm to 2.00pm.

Whilst observing two Brown Honeyeaters feeding in a flowering *Grevillea agrifolia*, two members of the tour group, Brenda and Graeme Smith, saw a large green praying mantis, which was waiting motionless in the foliage suddenly seize one of the honeyeaters. The mantis caught the honeyeater by its head in its right foreleg and appeared to be injecting the other foreleg into the bird.

Initially the victim beat its wings frantically in an endeavour to escape. Almost immediately two or three other Brown Honeyeaters, one thought to be its mate, attacked the praying mantis. It was at this stage I was called to the scene from nearby and alerted to what was happening.

The mantis, unaffected by the attacks by the other honeyeaters held on to its prey very securely. About one minute after capture, the trapped honeyeater ceased to struggle and hung lifelessly in the mantis' grasp. It appeared to be dead. The praying mantis then proceeded to remove all feathers from the throat of the honeyeater with its mouth and began to eat the flesh. After about one hour from the initial capture, I left the scene, but returned at 10-minute intervals to observe and note the situation. At one stage it appeared to be sucking the contents from the head. The position of both the honeyeater and the mantis did not change at all during this time, with the mantis continuing to hold on to the honeyeater with its forelegs as it fed. Attacks by the other honeyeaters decreased as time progressed. However, one bird, presumed to be the victim's mate continued to fly around in an agitated state and remained in the same tree during the entire episode.

Approximately one and a half

hours after capture the remains of the honeyeater were found lying at the base of the tree. The head and neck had been severed from the body and on close examination all the flesh including the eyes, but not the tongue, had been removed. I noted that the contents of the skull had also been completely removed. The body did not appear to have been touched, and the backbone, bare of flesh, was protruding from the top of the body.

Unfortunately, I did not keep the dead bird for further investigation. After searching for several minutes, the mantis was located in almost the same position, blending so well with the leaves that it was almost impossible to see it amongst the foliage.

Through discussion with others I have become aware of two other unpublished incidents where praying mantises have caught and eaten (or attempted to eat) vertebrates. At Dampier in the Pilbara in about 1990, Tom Moore of Busselton recollected seeing a praying mantis eating an unidentified freshly captured frog. In 1999, at "Kingston Rest" in the East Kimberley, Caroline Garstone investigated 'dreadful screams coming from a frog in their garden' and discovered a praying mantis in a tree that had captured a Green Tree Frog (*Litoria caerulea*). The praying mantis, which was holding the frog with its forelegs, was eating it while it was still alive.

Another incident occurred about 10.30am in June 2001. Jan Lewis, Helen McArthur and Johnny Schoenjahn released a Red-backed Fairy-wren (*Malurus melanocephalus*) weighing 6.7gms caught that day from their banding station in the mangroves at the mouth of Willie Creek north of Broome. The bird went off without any hesitation. However they were alerted a minute or two later by the sound of a number of wrens calling when previously none had been sighted or heard. There were at least eight Red-backed and Variegated Fairy-Wrens (*M. lamberti*) hopping through the mangroves in great excitement and for a moment or two their attention focused on them. They then realised the released bird was in trouble. It was hanging from its neck, fluttering its wings and appeared to be caught in a twig. To their amazement, on close inspection, the twig proved to be a large praying mantis, which had the wren in its front legs. Both the wren and the praying mantis were then captured. The praying mantis weighed 7.5gms and was almost 10 cms long (98mm from head to tail). Both the wren and the praying mantis were then released. The wren appeared to have sustained some damage to one eye but flew off strongly and was re-trapped a year later, still in good condition, with no apparent damage to the eye.

The literature refers to praying mantises having previously been

recorded eating vertebrates in Australia. In one reference by David Rence (1996) on p.242 in *Grasshopper Country, the Abundant Orthopteroid Insects of Australia* (p.242), the mantis involved belonged to the genus *Hierodula*, a genus "containing a large, robust species that have been known to feed on small vertebrates". Balderson (1991) in Chapter 21 (p.351) in *The Insects of Australia* refers to some larger species of mantises that have been recorded feeding on frogs, small lizards and fledgling birds.

I would like to thank Brenda and Graeme Smith for their help in recalling events and Wynton Maddeford for his help in locating other relevant information including the Red-backed Fairy-wren article. Also thanks to Jan Lewis, Helen McArthur, and Johnny Schoenjahn for allowing me to quote from their article. Special thanks to Kevin and Yvonne Coate for their help and encouragement to prepare this article and to John Dell for editing it for publication.

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